



How Can Partners Help Women Overcome Postpartum Depression?

Partners can be important lifelines for women suffering from depression after pregnancy.

Partners should be on the alert for characteristic symptoms:

- **Feelings of sadness and worthlessness**
- **Trouble sleeping**
- **Changes in appetite**
- **Excessive exhaustion**
- **Withdrawal from friends and family**
- **Irritability**
- **Anxiety**
- **Guilt**
- **Anger**

Need To Know:

Here are some tips for partners and friends of new mothers:

- **Remember that postpartum depression is a real illness.** Your partner is not going crazy; she is simply coping with tremendous changes in her life and her body.
- **Your support is vital in the recovery process.** She may think that she will never get through this. You can offer her understanding and reassurance.
- **Do not judge your partner's feelings or reactions.** Do not offer solutions that she is in no mood to hear. Instead, listen and sympathize.
- **Be consistent in offering your support and understanding,** and encourage her to take some time for herself. Mothers who try to be "the best" or "perfect" are most likely to become burned out.
- **Offer help without being asked or needed.** Take on more responsibility around the house. More than likely, laundry is piling up, dishes need washing, and floors need sweeping. If you do just a few chores, your partner may feel less overwhelmed.
- **Care for the baby for a few hours,** so the new mother can take a long bath, a walk, or read for a while.
- **If your partner or friend is unwilling to care for baby** or talking about suicide, seek immediate professional help.
- **Take time for yourself.** After all, you are learning new responsibilities, too. You may start to feel drained if you are trying to manage everything at once. You may even feel negative about the situation for a while, which is a normal part of the adjustment process and will pass.

Need To Know: Babies Get Depressed, Too

Left untreated, postpartum depression may have negative effects on babies, too. A study presented at the American Psychiatric Convention showed that some babies whose mothers are depressed might also become depressed. The babies in the study all had high blood levels of **cortisol**, a hormone present during stress. Months later, after the mothers had been treated for depression and their cortisol levels had returned to normal, the babies' cortisol levels remained high.

Researchers concluded that new mothers suffering from depression react by either smothering their babies with attention or ignoring them. Either reaction tends to stress baby. Other studies have shown that high levels of cortisol early in life can result in overreaction to stress later on. This is the best reason of all to keep yourself emotionally healthy.



Frequently Asked Questions

Here are some frequently asked questions related to depression after pregnancy.

Q: Instead of feeling happy after my baby was born, I cried constantly and felt terribly anxious. What's normal and what's not?

A: Normal reactions include irritability, anger, crying, exhaustion, tension, restlessness, anxiety, and insomnia, all of which appear about three days after birth and may last for about two weeks. If these symptoms worsen and extend beyond a few weeks, you may be experiencing true postpartum depression and should consult a physician or other health care professional.

Q: I was fine for the first month after my baby was born. Then I began feeling terrible. Is this the baby blues?

A: At least half of new mothers get the baby blues, a mild form of depression that begins a few days or a week after delivery and usually lasts no more than two weeks. Since you started feeling low about six weeks after delivery, it may be true postpartum depression, which can last from two weeks to a year. It is less common, affecting 10 to 20 percent of new mothers. Best to consult your physician.

Q: Is a sudden drop in hormones the only cause of postpartum depression?

A: Cases of postpartum depression have been reported in adoptive mothers and new fathers, which tells us that the condition is not only hormonal. Psychological or relationship factors may also contribute to postpartum depression. For example, a new mother may have exceptionally low confidence as a parent or may have a problematic relationship with her partner.

Q: Are there steps I can take if I am at risk for postpartum depression?

A: You can develop a postpartum plan that includes taking care of yourself, avoiding exhaustion, asking for help from family and friends, and finding a therapist and support group before delivery.


Q: Could breastfeeding my baby contribute to depression?

A: Social isolation or lack of support while breastfeeding can certainly contribute to depression. However, breastfeeding is not a contributing factor to postpartum depression. In fact, the hormonal changes after birth occur more gradually when a mother breastfeeds, and breastfeeding increases levels of the hormone prolactin, which is known to help produce a calm feeling.

Q: Even though I am exhausted, I cannot sleep. Is this just part of the baby blues?

A: Chances are that if everything is quiet and baby is asleep, you should be able to sleep as well, thereby getting the rest you need as a new mother. One of the signs that the baby blues may be developing into true postpartum depression is the inability to sleep no matter how tired you are or how quiet the house is. If this is happening, it may be wise to seek professional help.

Putting It All Together

- Depression after pregnancy refers to the negative thinking and feelings of despondency that many women experience after the birth of a child.
- In addition to the sad, lifeless feelings that accompany any depression, women who suffer from depression after pregnancy often fear that their baby will somehow be harmed and may worry that they are "bad" mothers.
- There are three types of depression after pregnancy: the baby blues, true postpartum depression, and postpartum psychosis.
- Several factors, including a history of depression, put some women at higher risk for depression after pregnancy.
- A brief period of mild sadness after childbirth is normal and affects up to 75 percent of all new mothers.
- Professional help is needed if symptoms continue for more than a few weeks.
- New mothers who are unable to care for themselves or their babies, or who are experiencing delusions and hallucinations, need immediate professional help.
- Although all the causes of depression after pregnancy are not known, rapid postpartum changes in levels of the female **hormones**  **progesterone** and **estrogen** are thought to play a major role in the disorder.
- A clear postpartum plan, with specific ideas about how to deal with the stresses of new motherhood, can help to reduce the risk of postpartum depression.
- Treatment for postpartum depression includes therapy, antidepressant medications, and peer support groups.
- A supportive partner can be a lifeline for a woman suffering from depression after pregnancy. But partners have to watch out for their own needs, too.
- A happier mother means a happier baby.